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Getting Ready for National Day: A Six-Step Plan

September 10, 2009 in [Uncategorized](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [1 comment](#)



From China.org, via Shanghaiist

Back in October 2007, with the Olympics still almost a year off in the future, I devised a [twelve-step reading plan](#) for *Outlook India*, the goal of which was to help interested observers (and maybe even journalists who would be covering the event) get ready to make sense of the Beijing Games. I've been thinking for some time that I should do something similar for this year's National Day. After all, 10/1/09 will have some things in common with 08/08/08, even if National Day is a thoroughly, well, *national* holiday, while the Olympics by definition is an *international* event. For example, when the PRC turns 60 at the start of next month, the main focus of attention will be a spectacle that, like that which opened the Olympics, will be choreographed by Zhang Yimou and intended to awe. And the rituals of this particular National Day, like the rituals that began that particular Olympics, will evoke China's past glories while continuing a rebranding exercise designed to show local and international audiences that the PRC is now a thoroughly modern country that can hold its own in the 21st century.

Due to various reasons (including other commitments and procrastination), I did not do this far enough in advance to justify a twelve-step plan, so I have cut it in half this time. And maybe that actually makes sense, as 10/1/09 may have the same director as 08/08/08, as well as a similarly massive or even bigger cast of performers, but it doesn't seem likely to have the same far-reaching impact. For China had never before hosted the Olympics, but this is far from Beijing's first National Day extravaganza—even though the number "60" (marking the completion of five twelve year cycles) can have a special resonance in Chinese culture not unlike that the numbers 50 and 100 have in Western ones.

Without further ado, here are six things to do to get ready for this National Day of special numerical significance:

1) Check out the sneak peeks of the spectacle that are beginning to make their way onto the web, often via sites that the most plugged in readers of this site will already have on their RSS feeds, such as Evan Osnos's "[Letter from China](#)," "[Shanghaiist](#)," and "[China Digital Times](#)." (And come to think of it, sneak peeks slipping out in advance provides another Olympic parallel, as [this 2008 China Beatcommentary](#) by Miri Kim shows.)

2) For a comparative perspective, watch [this clip](#) of the less colorful parades that took place in Moscow's Red Square when the Soviet Union turned 60.

3) For a more localized historical perspective, read the retrospective looks at past PRC National Days published in two recent issues of the always worth perusing *China Heritage Quarterly* that focus on commemoration. Of particular interest is [this essay](#) by Sang Ye and Geremie Barmé that compares and contrasts no less than 12 previous 1949 through 1999 October 1 events (and brings the total up to 13 with comments on what's planned for this year). Also worth a click and some time is *CHQ's* reprinting of a pair of interviews reflecting on 1949's National Day, which [first appeared](#) on the "Danwei.org" website a few years ago and are reprinted [here](#) with the addition of some stunning images from the Long Bow archive.

4) Speaking of the Long Bow filmmakers, the perfect song and dance extravaganza to view when National Day draws near is "The East is Red," which was created to mark the PRC turning 15 in 1964. It figures prominently in the opening sections of the Long Bow film "Morning Sun," and can be viewed on their website [here](#).

5) Moving both back before and forward past 1964, and filled with both interesting comments and images, is Chapter 3 of art historian Wu Hung's [*Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*](#). Well worth reading (as is the rest of the book), it is titled "Displaying the People: National Day Parades and Exhibition Architecture," it combines scholarly analysis of tropes and symbols with personal reflections on the author's participation in October 1 spectacles during his youth.

6) And, finally, just to help keep in mind that Beijing is not the only place that October "National Day" parades have taken place that look back to Chinese revolutionary upheavals and involve military hardware, view this [Cold War-infused newsreel](#) of a Taipei celebration. It took place in 1961 on October 10 ("Double 10"—numerological play goes back much further than 08/08/08), which is marked with fanfare in the Republic of China (ROC) to commemorate, of course, the transformations associated with 1911 (then a half-century in the past) rather than 1949.